***An 'Obama Effect' on Blacks' Test Scores?***

Friday, January 23rd, 2009

Newsweek

By Sharon Begley

On only the fourth day of his presidency, it’s obviously way too soon to assess whether Barack Obama’s effect on African-Americans will extend beyond providing hope and inspiration. Will he, for instance, goad black students to higher achievement, since he is living proof that working hard can pay off? One intriguing hint of what researchers led by Ray Friedman of the Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management calls the “Obama Effect” suggests that maybe, just maybe, Obama will do more for the scholastic achievement of African-Americans than anything since Brown v. Board of Education.

In a paper under review at the that Obama might close the black-white gap in scores on standardized tests. That gap reflects, in part, what psychologists call “stereotype threat”. In this now well-established phenomenon, being reminded that you belong to a group that, according to prevailing stereotypes, isn’t good at something causes you to do worse on a test of that something than if you were not so reminded. Similarly, if you are told that you are being assessed on something that stereotypes say your group is not good at (“girls can’t do math”) you do worse than it you’re told the test does not (in this example) detect gender differences. It’s easier to explain by example. When girls who are about to take a math test are reminded of their sex (basically they just check M or F on a line asking their gender), or when African-Americans about to take a standardized test such as the SAT are reminded of their race, or even when white males take a test that they’re told Asians excel on, they do worse than otherwise. Apparently, students become so anxious about confirming the stereotype that their brains stumble. As the researchers write, “concern about confirming entrenched negative racial stereotypes via poor performance . . . ironically leads to their underperformance on challenging exams.”

So here’s what the new study did. At four different times during 2008 (late August, before the Democratic nominating convention; just after Obama’s acceptance speech; in early October; and right after election day), it asked about 120 college students to take an online test consisting of 20 questions from the Graduate Record Exams (GREs). (Over the four testing periods, 84 black students and 388 white students, matched for education levels, participated.) They were told that the exam was “created by the Massachusetts Aptitude Assessment Center, and is used as a diagnostic tool to assess verbal problem-solving ability”—a ruse meant to activate the stereotype that blacks don’t do as well as whites on aptitude tests. They also had to indicate their race before taking the exam, also known to activate stereotype threat.

The results varied according to when the students took the test. Before the convention and in early October, the performance gap was as wide as ever: white students got a median score of 12.1 compared to blacks’ 8.8 before the convention; the scores were 12.9 and 8.4, respectively, in early October. But just after Obama’s convention speech, and just after election day, “when Obama’s stereotype-defying accomplishments garnered national attention,” as the researchers put it, there was a remarkable effect. Among students who watched Obama’s speech, blacks’ and whites’ scores were statistically equal (10.3 vs. 12.1) after the acceptance speech and 9.8 vs. 11.1 after Election Day. The difference is considered statistically insignificant--that is, likely due to chance.

Here’s how the researchers see it: “The fact that we found effects with a random sample of American participants, far removed from any direct contact with Obama, attests to the impact that such a powerful role model can have. At the same time, this research provides evidence that real world role models, such as Obama, can trump racial stereotypes only when their success and accomplishments are especially salient. . . . Obama’s impact on Black-Americans’ performance may only occur when his success is highlighted”—that is, the performance gap vanished when his success sparked a media frenzy (acceptance speech, election) but not when it was less visible (pre-convention, early October).

Now the caveats. It is significant that the performance gap vanished in the wake of the acceptance speech only among black students who watched it. Among blacks who did not watch it, scores continued to lag those of whites. That raises the possibility that only some black students will benefit from Obama’s trailblazing. I asked Joshua Aronson of New York University, one of the founders of the research on stereotype threat, what he thought of the study. “They hypothesis [that Obama’s success might eliminate stereotype threat for blacks] makes a lot of sense,” he said. “Studies have shown that even a brief intervention [like watching Obama’s Denver speech] can nullify a stereotype. But t

Other experts nevertheless sounded a note of caution similar to Aronson’s, echoing the concern that the Obama Effect may only apply to a particular sub-population of African Americans. Clearly, more experiments need to be done. But the very possibility that Obama’s achievement will pull along an entire generation is intriguing.